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Balzac and The Little Chinese Seamstress , by Dai Sijie, Random House 2001 and *The Uncommon Reader* by Alan Bennett, Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2007

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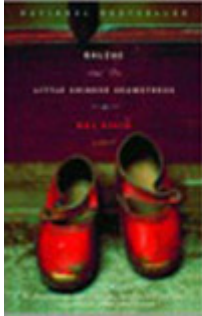
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Because Ideas Matter...

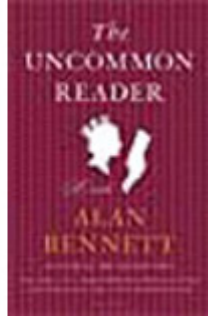
The faculty and staff of Butler University's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences presents

Recommended Readings



Balzac and The Little Chinese Seamstress

by Dai Sijie. Random House 2001



The Uncommon Reader

by Alan Bennett. Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2007

Reviewed by Paula Saffire

All of us who are readers know, perhaps unconsciously, that reading is subversive. But to find it portrayed as DELICIOUSLY SUBVERSIVE is a true delight. Two recent books, one by a Chinese author living in France, the other by a popular British author, lay out the transformations that result from becoming a reader. Both books are coy, riddled with learned amusements. Dai Sijie's book *Balzac and The Little Chinese Seamstress* (better than the film) puts reading in a political context, during the Cultural Revolution in China, and shows us the allure of reading even when - especially when -- it is forbidden. The two male characters actually learn sexual desire from their criminal reading of French novels. The beautiful seamstress whom they have schooled in love makes an unexpected bolt for freedom even from her book-supplying suitors. (After all, if reading really liberates us, who can predict its consequences?) In *The Uncommon Reader*, by Alan Bennett, Her Majesty's dogs run off, which brings the Queen into a bookmobile. Against the resistance of all (but one) who surround her, she becomes a reader. To her secretary's suggestion that briefing is enough, Her Majesty replies, "Reading is untidy, discursive and perpetually inviting. Briefing closes down a subject, reading open it up." The Queen develops empathy for the first time; reading has given her the ability to imagine the feelings of others. On the other hand, reading is a worm in the apple of duty. Like all of us, the Queen becomes impatient with humdrum tasks. She is surprised to see how reading has "drained her of enthusiasm for anything else." Eventually she throws off the thrall of avid reading only to become... Well, dear readers, I will not deprive you of the abrupt pleasure of Bennett's adorable ending.

- Paula Saffire is associate professor of Classics at Butler University